ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 101
AIRFORCE
August 1985

VIEWPOINT

The Selling of Secrets

By Gen. T. R. Milton, USAF (Ret.), CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Tougher rules on security clearances may help—but another part of the problem is our national tolerance in matters of patriotism and ethics.

It may be stretching a point to link the dismal business of the Walker spy ring with sympathy for the Hanoi regime during the Vietnam War, but let's stretch it anyway. By the standards that earned Axis Sally and Tokyo Rose national indignation and prison sentences, such conduct should at least have suffered widespread contempt. Instead, as we all know, those who engaged in it are much admired figures, so to speak.

Be that as it may, our tolerance of aberrant behavior has undergone a remarkable change in these last two decades. The Chicago White Sox of the 1919 World Series scandal were banished forever to baseball's outer darkness, while athletic cheaters these days attract sympathy and advocates for a second chance. Ethics and patriotism, it appears, are not what they used to be.

The Walker business is an example of just how low the moral standards of that particular group of fellow citizens have fallen. They do not even have the excuse of ideology, as did the Rosenbergs, only a desire to make an easy buck. Whether that desire would have been tempered by thoughts of the electric-chair death of the Rosenbergs is an academic question. John Walker and his pals knew the worst they faced was prison.

As a result of the Walker case, there is to be a general tightening of security, or at least an effort in that direction. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger has ordered a ten percent reduction in security clearances, while Navy Secretary John Lehman has gone even further, vowing an eventual cutback of fifty percent.

So long as the removal of clearances is done judiciously, which is to say after determining that there is no need to know, it may serve a purpose, but it is by no means a cure. Clearances held by those who have no need to know are, for the most part, simply status symbols. People holding that kind of clearance are not likely to turn to spying, if only because they have little to offer. Conversely, those with a need to know in order to perform their duties must be cleared. All the recent spy cases have come from that category. More rigid background checks might possibly have turned up something, but it is by no means certain, for these non-ideological turncoats did not associate with Communists—that is, not socially.

According to some counterintelligence estimates, the Soviets may have as many as 800 agents—KGB and GRU—in the United States. If each of these agents has five or six dupes on his string—and that seems to be the usual number—then we have 4,000 or 5,000 Walkers in our midst. What this amounts to in technological leakage is anyone's guess, but signs of that leakage are there for all to see. The MiG-29, for instance, could just as well be a version of the F-15. Soviet developments in refueling, AWACS, bombers, and transports all owe a visible debt to US technology as well as, we can suppose, to those prostitutes who make life easy for Soviet agents.

One of the comforting reassurances to USSR quantitative superiority has been our superiority in technology. We must now come to grips with the possibility that anything we develop will shortly find its way into Soviet hands, thanks to our security sieve. We buy, they fly.

We have one spy's word for it that the game is not worth the price. Christopher Boyce, the real-life Falcon of the movie *The Falcon and the Snowman*, is currently doing sixty-eight years in a federal prison for espionage and escape. In an interview with Ted Koppel on the television program *Nightline*, which was conducted from prison, Boyce drew the similarity between working for the KGB and carrying around a sixty-pound stone that one could not put down. He went on, a disillusioned traitor, to warn that the KGB, beyond gathering secrets, is really interested in influencing US policy through its hired stooges. Boyce, for one, claims to have seen the light, albeit a little late. The discouraging note in that interview was his statement that, when he became a traitor, he viewed the CIA as the enemy—a trendy attitude a few years ago and one still in vogue on certain campuses.

For a time, canceling clearances may make everyone more conscious of the problem. Sooner or later, however, the number of clearances will inevitably increase, or essential tasks will not get done. Yet a way must be found to curb this sordid business of selling out the country. The first thing that comes to mind is a swift and severe penalty for peacetime espionage, something Secretary Weinberger has already suggested. To paraphrase Samuel Johnson, the thought of the electric chair might wonderfully concentrate potentially traitorous minds on other ways of augmenting income.

Capital punishment, however, is only a partial answer. The United States will always be the world's easiest and most profitable target for espionage. There is not much anyone can do to alter the fact that foreign agents have little difficulty in moving around this country and talking to anyone they choose. Somehow, then, there must be a renewed awareness of what treason is all about. It is not only a loathsome crime but, by its very nature, a danger to us all.

For those who are presently engaged in selling secrets, it is too late for an appeal to conscience. We can only hope they are caught. But the kind of mindless acquiescence that left Hanoi sympathizers unmarked and that welcomed home the draft dodgers has had something to do with this breakdown in what used to be called patriotism. It is past time for beginning once more to teach the young just what betrayal of one's country actually means. ■